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Author(s): Domnica Radulescu

Source: *Theatre Journal*, Mar., 2008, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Mar., 2008), pp. 87-113

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25070159

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Caterina's Colombina: The Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France

Domnica Radulescu

Introduction

Colombina, the diminutive of the Italian *colomba* (dove), is the name taken by the female-trickster in the commedia dell'arte during the seventeenth century. Earlier, analogous female roles were Franceschina, Olivetta, Ricciolina, and Diamantina, which appear as early as the Gelosi company alongside the role of Isabella, created by the world-famous actress Isabella Andreini in the second half of the sixteenth century.[1] Colombina first appears as one of the main female roles in the troupe of Fiorelli-Locatelli, which later became the *Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne* and which was the last commedia dell'arte troupe still residing in France when it was expelled in 1697 by order of Louis XIV.[2]

Isabella Franchini Biancolelli was the first Colombina. Her granddaughter, Catherine or, by her Italian name, Caterina Biancolelli (1665–1716), was the second Colombina in the repertoire of the commedia. Her father was Domenico Biancolelli (1636–88), one of the most famous of all Arlecchinos, and her mother was Orsola Cortesi (1637–1718),

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Domnica Radulescu is professor of French and Italian literatures, women's studies, and medieval Renaissance studies at Washington and Lee University. She has authored, edited, and coedited several books and edited collections on European literatures, cultures, and theatre, and is the author of the novel, Train to Trieste *(2008).*

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[1] Also known as *commedia all'improviso* (improvised comedy), *commedia delle maschere* (comedy of masks), and *commedia dei zanni* (comedy of servants), the *commedia dell'arte* is exclusively an actors' theatre that emerged and thrived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy, France, and later in Spain, England, and Germany. The term *arte* is used in its ancient meaning of skill and professionalism, calling to mind the medieval guilds of specialized groups of professionals. The complete definition of this theatre is given by the very names it has acquired: it relies entirely on the actors' professionalism and imagination, it is largely based on improvisation, most of the characters wear masks, and the characters who give it its very comic essence are servants. The most famous, funny, and resourceful of all the servants, or *zanni*, is Arlecchino, who was played by some of the most skilled commedia actors throughout the centuries, including Domenico Biancolelli, the father of Caterina Biancolelli. For works on the role of women performers in the Italian Renaissance and, in particular, the role of Isabella Andreini, see the book by Anne MacNeil titled *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); see also Melissa Vickery Bareford, "Isabella Andreini—Reimaging 'Woman' in Early Modern Italy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri–Columbia, 2000).

[2] Pierre-Louis Duchartre, Gustave Attinger, Virginia Scott, Delia Gambelli, and Charles Mazouer all point out the presence of Colombina as part of the repertoire of the Italian troupe in France under Louis XIV. For sixteenth-century commedia scenarios see Flaminio Scala, *Scenarios of the Commedia dell 'Arte,* trans. Henri F. Salerno (New York: Limelight Editions, 1990.)

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who played the role of Eularia—the ingénue or *innamorata*.[3] While Franchini was quite a popular Colombina during the early seventeenth century, critics largely credit her granddaughter with giving the role unprecedented psychological complexity and comic vibrancy. It was Caterina Biancolelli who, starting in 1683, played Colombina in plays performed by the *Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne*.

Although she is credited in passing in most studies of the commedia dell'arte of this period as the one who made the part of Colombina famous, no full studies of her, her character, or her role as a performer have ever been written. This essay is devoted entirely to the actress Caterina Biancolelli and, in particular, to her creation of Colombina. It also explores how the character acts as a superb illustration of transgressive humor, subversive performance, and improvisational comedy. The plays in which she acted were gathered by the actor Evaristo Gherardi in a six-volume collection in 1700.[4]

The thesis of this essay is that by using the rich oral tradition of the female performers in the commedia tradition that Caterina Biancolelli inherited as well as her own comedic genius, she generated the enlightened comedy of the first recorded texts of the Italian troupe residing in France during the reign of Louis XIV. I argue that Caterina's Colombina takes the improvisational comedy of her Italian predecessors in the genre of the commedia dell'arte to a new level of emancipation in which the female protagonist negotiates gender, stage presence, and disguise in order to achieve personal fulfillment despite the obstacles of patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles of seventeenth-century France. As the essay will attempt to demonstrate, Caterina's Colombina resourcefully weaves her Italian heritage of entertainment with the performative subtleties of the French coquette, and the result is a new woman who defies the place that society has traditionally reserved for her and her kind.

Caterina Biancolelli was a gifted and successful actress, singer, and dancer who drew the attention of Louis XIV and of the theatre reviewers of the time, including Donneau de Visé, who wrote theatre columns for the seventeenth-century journal, *Le Mercure galant*. In the October 1683 issue, de Visé raves about the Italian troupe and the two Biancolelli sisters:

[3] Delia Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi: Dall'inferno alla corte del re sole* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1993). Gambelli provides ample information about the Biancolelli family and their theatrical activities throughout the seventeenth century in France. She mentions the moving anecdote related by Thomas Simon Gueullette that Caterina decided to play the role of Colombina when as a child she saw in her father's house a portrait of her grandmother Isabella carrying a basket with two doves ("*colombe*"), a symbol of Colombina (256). See also Thomas-Simon Gueullette, *Notes et souvenirs sur le théâtre italien au XVIII siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1938), and Silvio d'Amico, *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (Rome: Casa Editrice Le Maschere, 1975), 425. It is to be noted that Caterina's mother, Orsola Cortesi, was also a playwright besides being a consumate performer, as were other actresses during the seventeenth century. For more information on the Biancolelli family, see also the article by Sergio Monaldini, "Arlecchino figlio di Pulcinella e Colombina: Note sulla famiglia Biancolelli, tra Bologna e Parigi," *L'Archiginnasio* 91 (1996): 83–161. For more information on the scenarios in which Caterina's mother played the role of Eularia, see also Delia Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi: lo scenario di Domenico Biancolelli* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1977).

[4] Most of the scenes and plays in which Caterina developed her character of Colombina are gathered in the famous collection, published in 1700, of Evaristo Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi, ou le recueil général de toutes les comédies et françaises jouées par les comédiens italiens du roy, pendant tout le temps qu'ils ont été en service* (Amsterdam: chez Adrian Braakman, 1700). Charles Mazouer notes that Colombina undergoes a certain evolution throughout the Gherardi collection and moves significantly further away from the role of maid to that of *amoureuse*, while also remaining the embodiment of the spirit of the Italian theatre. In *Le Théâtre d' Arlequin: Comédies et comédiens italiens en France au XVII^e siécle* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 263. See also Charles Mazouer, *Evaristo Gherardi: Le Théatre italien* (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1994).

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> Never has the Italian Comedy been so successful and appreciated in France, as it is presently. . . . If Arlequin is inimitable in the many parts he is seen playing in this play, his two daughters are no less so. The different characters that they play are so well accomplished that they have attracted the tireless admiration of the entire city of Paris. Never have we seen so much intelligence for the Comedy, with such impressive youth. There is no character that they cannot play, and as soon as they appear in such or such scene, they seem uniquely made for the character they represent.[5]

Caterina is described as small, brunette, and of pleasant voice and demeanor.[6] An engraving by Leroux in 1686 portrays Caterina, posing as Columbina, in a rather stylized and humorous way. Her attire is suggestive of a maid's costume because of the apron and a cloth she is holding in her right hand, but a touch of elegance is added to this: a lacey, corseted dress holding her minuscule waist and flowing to the ground with a train in the back. In the engraving, she is portrayed as larger than life; on each side of her, two dwarf-like figures are represented: a Pantalone or *vecchio*, and an Arlecchino, a servant or *zanni* type. She has an ironic smile that seems to correspond to the poem written at the bottom of the drawing: "Colombina deceives her lovers every day, she has the self-assurance of a monkey and the cunning of a fox" (see fig. 1).[7]

While the role of Isabella, known as the ingénue or *innamorata*, was evolving into a whimsical, brazen young woman disdainful of marriage,[8] the sassy Colombina was bringing a new dimension of female wit and humor to the French stage and the commedia repertoire in general. The role of Colombina began gaining a comedic intricacy overshadowing that of her mistress and even, as Bruce Griffiths notes, converging at times with that of the *innamorata* or *amoureuse*.[9] The *tipi fissi* (fixed types) of the commedia were not so fixed any more and Caterina/Colombina plays an impressive range of parts, including the sassy maid, the freelance *intrigante*, the *fausse ingénue*, and other characters such as a long-winded author, a doctor, a lawyer, a peddler, a knight, a captain, and even a government representative.[10] As Winifred Smith has noted, "where Isabella Andreini chose one disguise and found it enough throughout a play, Gherardi's Colombina must needs keep the audience awake by tormenting Arlequin in a constantly changing personality."[11]

[5] Donneau de Visé, *Le Mecure galant*, October 1683 (translation mine). First quoted by Virginia Scott in *The Commedia dell'Arte in Paris: 1644–1697* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990).

[6] D'Amico, *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*; Luigi Rasi, *I comici italiani: Biografia, bibliografia, iconografia* (Florence: Fratelli Bocca, 1897–1905), 425.

[7] "Colombina dans ses Amours / trompe ses Amans tous les jours, / Comme un singe elle a de l'adresse, / Et plus qu'un renard de Finesse" (translation mine).

[8] The sixteenth-century actress, scholar, and writer Isabella Andreini (1562–1604) was the one who created and brought to unparalleled heights the role of the *innamorata*. All contemporaneous documents attest to her improvisational genius, acting skills, and poetic talent. She also played in disguise and created, in the role of Isabella, the image of a powerful, independent, resourceful, and, at times, cunning woman who broke the accepted boundaries of the feminine for her time. The scenarios that she created and in which she acted, in collaboration with her husband Francesco Andreini, are all gathered in the sixteenth-century collection by Flaminio Scala, *Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte*, ed. and trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989).

[9] Bruce Griffiths, "Sunset: From *Commedia dell'Arte* to *Comédie Italienne*," in *Studies in the Commedia dell'Arte*, ed. David George and Christopher Gossip (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 93–94.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Study in Italian Popular Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 202.

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COLOMBINE
Colombine dans Ses Amours,
trompe Ses, Amans, tous les jours,
Comme vn Singe elle a de ladresse,
Et plus qu'vn renar de Finesse.

Figure 1. Caterina Biancolelli in the role of Colombina. (Engraving by Leroux, 1686.)

Critics unanimously point to Caterina Biancolelli as the one who brought the role of the maid to an unprecedented level of wit and complexity. Virginia Scott points out that "Colombina is actually on the way to becoming a sort of French Female First Zanni, a trickster who is always successful and never gets caught. The character has no antecedents in the earlier repertory."[12] According to Jean-Pierre Louis Duchartre, it was the daughter of Domenico Biancolelli who brought the role to its most accomplished level of comedy.[13] Charles Mazouer notes that Caterina, who marked her debut as Co-

[12] Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte in Paris*, 301.

[13] Although not always reliable and, at times, guilty of sexist comments such as calling the face of the actress Isabella Andreini, in one of the few portraits of her time, "bovine," we need to acknowledge the study of Jean-Pierre Louis Duchartre, *La commedia dell'arte* (Paris: Editions d'Art et d'Industrie, 1955), 267.

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lombina in 1683, created the most "representative" type destined to the Italian theater. He highlights her cynical wisdom, her taste for disguise, and her verve and wit, next to which even the character of Arlequin pales at times. Mazouer also points out that the personality of the actress was an important catalyst in the creation of the role of Colombina, which she developed well beyond the usual range of maid or confidante.[14] The *Enciclopedia dell spettacolo* also identifies Caterina as the most famous and fully developed Colombina, celebrated for her pleasant voice and gestures, "incommensurable finesse and inimitable verve" of performance,[15] and her many disguises, from knight to doctor to lawyer. In Campardon's dictionary titled *Les comédiens du roi de la troupe italienne pendant les deux derniers siécles* Caterina Biancolelli is again presented as the creator of the role of Colombina, to which, it declares, she gave energy, verve, wit, and extraordinary variety.[16] François and Claude Parfaict note that Caterina "became in little time the most perfect comedienne of her genre who had ever appeared in the Italian theater."[17] And Luigi Rasi, while unequivocally considering Caterina as the most famous Colombina, has noted that it was her investiture of the role that "created a comic universe, changing into a thousand characters," and that she "achieved gigantic proportions, the character around whom all the others turn."[18]

As if to exhibit to the world the grandeur of her role as female trickster, in 1695, Caterina appeared in the magnificent costume of Arlecchina in the one-act play, *Le Retour de la foire de Bezons* (*The Return of the Fair of Bezons*)—which later became popular in feasts and carnivals—from Gherardi's collection, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*. She is thus represented in an engraving from 1685, and the same image of Colombina later inspired Watteau in his painting, *Les Acteurs italiens* (see fig. 2).[19] After the closing of the Italian theatre in 1697, Caterina was invited to join the French theatre—an invitation that she proudly refused, thus taking leave of the stage forever.

While Colombina's actual lines and tirades offer a rather varied image of the character, there is little information about her actual performance, improvisatory work, and input into the character. Under Louis XIV, the commedia dell'arte in which Isabella Andreini had so shined a century earlier became the *comédie italienne* and lost some of its improvisatory quality. The *comédie italienne* was delineated and controlled by French writers hired especially to help reconcile the differences between the early commedia dell'arte and the classical requirements of seventeenth-century French theatre, as well as to respond more and more to the expectations of French audiences and the court. Anne Mauduit de Fatouville, Jean-François Regnard, who was a friend of Fatouville, and

[14] Charles Mazouer, 22. See also the extensive study by Charles Mazouer on the Italian theatre in sixteenth-century France, *Le Théâtre d'Arlequin: Comédies et comédiens italiens en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002). For an elaborate study of the improvisational and theatrical work of Caterina's father, Domenico Biancolelli, of his scenarios and of the Fiorelli-Locatelli troupe later to become the *Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne*, see Stefania Spada, *Domenico Biancolelli ou l'art d'improviser* (Naples: Institut Universitaire Oriental, 1969).

[15] "Dimisurata finezza e inimitabile brio" (translation mine).

[16] Emile Campardon, *Les comédiens du roi de la troupe italienne pendant les deux derniers siécles* (Paris: Berger-Levrault et Cie, 1880).

[17] François Parfaict and Claude Parfaict, *Histoire de l'ancien théâtre italien depuis son origine en France jusqu'à sa suppression en l'année 1697* (Paris: Lambert, 1753), 106.

[18] Rasi, *I comici italiani*, 438–42.

[19] Ibid., 440.

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Figure 2. Caterina Biancolelli in the costume of Arlecchina in the play *Le Retour de la foire de Bezons* (*The Return of the Fair of Bezons*), 1685.

Jean Palaprat are some of the best-known authors of the scenes gathered in Gherardi's collection. This collection represents a significant departure from the scenarios of the early commedia dell'arte, such as the ones gathered by Flaminio Scala toward the end of the sixteenth century. While containing little of literary value (as hardly any dialogues are recorded), Scala's scenarios provide abundant clues about movement, gestures, and performance in general, thus making it easier for today's performance scholars to ascertain the input of the performers in the creation of their roles. Conversely, since there was obviously less room for improvisation in the seventeenth-century *comédie italienne*, and since the new collections of scenes recorded dialogues and the texts of the actors but noted little of the movement taking place onstage, it is much harder to ascertain from surviving texts how much of the roles were still the creation of the actors, and how much the creation of the authors who wrote for the company. Several critics have also noted the possible influences of Molière on the characters of

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the *comédie italienne*, particularly on Colombina's character.[20] This is highly debatable. It should be noted that as saucy or rebellious as many of Molière's female characters are, particularly in resisting the authority of tyrannical fathers, their revolt never attains the level of Caterina's Colombina; they never directly attack the overall structure of patriarchy, never tear down or disrupt the "happy ending" of marriage, and never divorce or cross-dress. By the time Caterina took over the role of the maid under the poetic name of Colombina, there was already an established line of actresses who had chiseled the part of the *zanna,* preparing it for its grand *fin de siècle* apotheosis.[21]

The role of Colombina is the female comic role par excellence. But unlike the male comic parts and like the role created by Isabella Andreini and the other female roles of the commedia, Colombina is, to a significant degree, the creation of the actress herself. Critics seem to agree on this point: Duchartre notes that, given the late appearance of women onstage, the female characters are not created by an ancient tradition, and that the "history of Isabella, Colombina, and Zerbinetta is rather that of the comedienne herself."[22] Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino also note that the female roles of the commedia were largely the creation of the actresses themselves, who, to a significant degree, merged their private and stage personae."[23] Griffiths points out the virtuosity of the actresses playing Isabella and Colombina, who, he claims, were largely responsible for the richness of their parts.[24]

It is crucial to understand that Caterina Biancolelli and her generation of actresses already had behind them a rich tradition of female commedia performers who challenged, through the roles they created, the traditional roles assigned to women by society, which excluded them from the public sphere. As feminist critics of sixteenth-century commedia have eloquently shown, Isabella Andreini and her troupe played a revolutionary role in the emancipation of women in sixteenth-century Italy. Isabella is thought to have contributed to the creation of the "Renaissance woman,"[25] while "the invasion of theater's public spaces by the actress and the disruptive female figure she so frequently personified" led to the grounding of the theatre space in "social rather than civic or political dynamics."[26] The comedy created and acted by Caterina Bian-

[20] Critics such as Griffiths, Mazouer, and Scott point out similarities between the *comédie italienne* and Molière's theatre. Mazouer, in *Le Théâtre d'Arlequin,* claims that the character of Colombina in the Gherardi collection has also undergone the "lateral influence of Molière" (246). However, such a statement neglects the influence that all the previous female performers and roles of maid or *confidente* exerted on Molière before the *Troupe Italienne*. Moliére's Toinettes and Dorines have clearly absorbed the influence of such commedia characters as Franceschina, Ricciolina, and Diamantina, as well as the first Colombina played by Isabella Franchini.

[21] For instance, the actress immediately preceding Caterina in the role of the soubrette, Patricia Adami, was also a spirited, talented actress, whose stage name was Diamantine. According to the Parfaicts, she "shined a lot" ("elle brilla beaucoup") and was of "great vivacity in the execution of her roles" (57–58). And before Patricia Adami's Diamantine, the role of the maid was performed by a certain actress named Beatrix, or, according to Rasi, Beatrice Adami (the last name with a question mark), who also, according to the Parfaicts, "brilla beaucoup" (36). The Italian word *zanna* is the feminine of *zanni* and means "servant."

[22] Duchartre, *La commedia dell'arte*, 248.

[23] Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte* (Firenze: La Casa Usher, 1982), 330–45.

[24] Griffiths, "Sunset," 101–2.

[25] See the chapter about Isabella Andreini's role, "Isabella Andreini—Reimaging 'Woman'," in Bareford, "Isabella Andreini."

[26] Jane Tylus, "Women at the Windows: *Commedia dell'Arte* and Theatrical Practice in Early Modern Italy," *Theatre Journal* 49 (1997): 323–42.

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colelli beautifully illustrates Susan Carlson's position on comedy created by women, namely that "when women write drama, comedy is one of their primary vehicles for expressing triumph."[27] As Carlson has done with respect to British comedy, I would like to show how, in the texts of the Italian troupe in seventeenth-century France, Colombina's comedy "accommodates and/or promotes change."[28] My position allies itself as well with that of Pamela Allen Brown who, in her book *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep*, challenges the notion that "women were tragic victims, passive ciphers, or cultural sponges" and explores jest and humor that reflects "female resistance and productive fantasy."[29]

My belief is that Caterina Biancolelli largely authored her role as Colombina, but in a way that incorporated her own story and personality as well as the less familiar though rich tradition of female comedy and performance. The input of the French authors of this collection is of course significant. But the authors who wrote for the Italian actors of the second half of the seventeenth century mainly recorded, revised, adjusted, and rewrote comedies and parts that already existed and that were already being played by the Italian actors.

Caterina drew from what was by now a rich tradition of female humor and, by means of the professional training specific to the trade of commedia dell'arte performers and her own improvisational genius, she brought the character of the female trickster to a more subversive and richly comic level. Like male performers, who transmitted their *arte* much like family secrets from father to son, so it was with the female performers. Besides the family ties that united the commedia performers, actresses were also the inheritors of a rich oral tradition particular to women. According to Kathleen McGill's groundbreaking study on the role of women in the development of the commedia dell'arte, women's early modern forms of cultural production, being largely in the area of oral expression, are substantially responsible for the improvisatory competencies of the commedia, and for the very development of the genre. It is crucial to situate Caterina, as well as any other female performer or playwright, within the context of a historical evolution and as part of a tradition of women's theatrical expression in order to pursue the worthy task of seeking "new articulations of theatre history"—not only in order to uncover "blind spots," but also in order to re-categorize theatre history in ways that challenge the existing cannon and that integrate the contributions of women in an organic and consistent manner.[30]

Throughout the Italian Renaissance, women did have, under circumstances that varied from the tight walls of convents to the swarming commercial life of the city-states,

[27] Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 4.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 7–9.

[30] See the field-defining studies of Kathleen McGill, "Improvisatory Competence and the Cueing of Performance: The Case of the *Commedia dell'Arte*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 10 (1990): 111–22; and "Women and Performance: The Development of Improvisation by the Sixteenth-Century *Commedia dell'Arte*," *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991): 59–69. The quotes in this sentence are given from the groundbreaking article by Susan Bennett titled "Decomposing History (Why Are There so Few Women in Theater History?)," in *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theater History*, ed. W. B. Worthen, with Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71, 84.

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a culture of performance and comedy. A relatively modern character like Colombina did not appear in a vacuum; there is no reason to believe that the later actresses, even when they were born and educated in France (as were the Biancolelli sisters), had lost that rich oral heritage of *contrasti* (dialogues), ballads, dramatic songs, improvisatory skills, *beffas* (jokes), and the taste for disguise and cross-dressing. There were Italian actresses who awed audiences and led acting troupes throughout Europe; the bawdy, witty, and courageous women of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; flamboyant and irreverent courtesan poets like Veronica Franco; and nuns who wrote and performed bawdy plays dealing with gender issues within their convents. During the Renaissance, women, both real and fictional often challenged and broke taboos, making their voices heard in diverse and vibrant ways.[31]

The character of Colombina emerged from a tradition of female humor and performance that dates from the Middle Ages.[32] The courtesans, with their rich tradition of performance and entertainment[33] (and who were known as "highly sophisticated conversationalists and cunning rhetoricians"[34]), the female jugglers and mimes,[35] the nuns' convent Renaissance drama,[36] the women entertainers at weddings, the Roma street entertainers,[37] the soldier prostitutes of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance,[38] and the actresses of the commedia dell'arte before her can all be considered Colombina's heritage of comedy and humor. And, of course, as pointed out earlier, the actresses in Caterina's own family and the multitude of roles they developed gave her both the drive and the professional preparation to shine in her role as Colombina. Besides Caterina's connection to her grandmother Franchini regarding the role of Colombina,

[31] Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). This study contains valuable information about women's traditions of improvisation, comedy, and disguise in societies as diverse and varied as Nepal, France, and Sicily. See also Tylus's article "Women at the Window" and her interpretation of the scene, recounted by Machiavelli, in which Caterina Sforza shows her genitals from a window to her enemies who had kidnapped her children and, by this act, leaves them dumbfounded and aware of their error; and the article by Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Woman in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

[32] Cesare Molinari, *Theatre through the Ages*, trans. Colin Hamer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972); and Cesare Molinari, *La commedia dell'arte* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1985).

[33] See Lust, Griffin, and Rosenthal on the lives, art, and improvisatory skills of the courtesans: Annette Lust, *From the Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000); Susan Griffin, *The Book of the Courtesans* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001); Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[34] Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 2. The *cortegiana onesta* or the "honest courtesan" was called as such because she earned her living by her performance art and by entertaining the high society. The Venetian courtesans were extremely educated and erudite, improvised and wrote poetry. Veronica Franco was the most famous of the Venetian sixteenth-century "honest courtesans" and wrote and published poetry during her life time.

[35] See Franca Rame and Annette Lust on medieval female jugglers. Rame's pertinent comments on the role of women in the creation of a bawdy and sexually charged kind of comedy throughout the centuries are gathered in Dario Fo *Le gai savoir de l'acteur*, trans. Valerie Tasca (Paris: Arche, 1987).

[36] See Elisa Weaver's book about convent drama and entertainment: *Convent Theater in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[37] See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), on popular culture and women's alternative forms of entertainment and oral traditions.

[38] See Deanna Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), on prostitutes and the special category of soldier prostitutes both in the real-life Renaissance and in literary representations.

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Caterina undoubtedly learned from her mother Orsola as well. The fact that Caterina's Colombina veers from the maid to the *amoureuse* throughout the Gherardi collection can also be interpreted as the direct influence of her mother, who played Eularia—the role of the *Seconda Donna*, or the second *innamorata/amoureuse.*

The many ellipses and gaps in the texts, the parenthetical notations about an "Italian" scene with *lazzis* (comic interludes and actions performed by the Italian actors meant to link scenes and to entertain the public) and improvised dialogues to fill these gaps, the authors' comments that they were unable to reproduce the Italian scenes in writing, the fragmentary nature of many of the texts, and the insertion of actual lines in Italian within the French dialogues—all are components of the Gherardi collection that suggest the still strong presence and artistic contribution of the Italian actresses and actors to the performance of these texts, as well as to their fluid and impromptu nature. Despite the presence of French scenes written and inserted in their shows, the Biancolelli troupe was still using Italian scenes in their performances.

Caterina was particularly admired for her great versatility in all areas of performance: acting, singing, dancing, and playing instruments, and she often broke into singing or dancing in the middle of a scene—as in the plays *La Coquette* (*The Coquette*) and *Les Souhaits* (*The Desires*). In addition, she was bilingual and performed with ease in both French and Italian. The Biancolelli troupe as a whole was known for its facility in converting improvised Italian dialogues into French.[39]

In trying to ascertain the originality of Caterina's Colombina, another event seems of particular importance. In 1694, when Gherardi first tried to publish this collection, the Biancolelli troupe angrily petitioned the king against Gherardi, maintaining that the publication was being done without the permission of the actors; that the collection contained the troupe's scenes and plays of the troupe over the last thirty years (meaning since the mid-1660s); and that this collection was highly damaging to the success of the troupe because it destroyed the element of spontaneity and freshness of unpublished plays that were presented each time anew, as if for the first time. Isabelle and Catherine Biancolelli, together with their mother Orsola Cortesi, were among the petitioners. Angry members of the troupe actually destroyed the printing plates of their precious scenes.[40]

Obviously, the Italian actresses and actors were seeing their mythic, hard-learned art of improvisation threatened by the publication of actual scenes and dialogues, and the magic of their success disclosed and dissipated by the proliferation of the printed word. As Peter Burke has noted, "the book was a dangerous competitor" to performance, improvisation, and oral culture ever since the first presses in the fifteenth

[39] Duchartre, *La commedia dell'arte*, 142. In support of the argument that Colombina is largely the creation of the actress herself are also Scott's comments that in ascertaining how much of the repertory of the Comédie Italienne consisted of French scenes and plays and how much of Italian scenes, there has been too much reliance on Gherardi's collection. She suggests that, while some French plays were introduced into the repertoire of the company, "the traditional repertory continued to be played, sometimes with new French scenes added, or perhaps with traditional scenes translated into French" (275). In addition, she points out the likelihood that some of the plays in the Gherardi collection, "especially those attributed to Monsieur D***, were originally improvised in Italian, with French ornaments," and notes that throughout the mid-1680s "their performances were almost totally improvised" (277). See Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte in Paris*.

[40] Campardon, *Les comédiens du roi de la troupe italienne*, 2:109–12.

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century. "The book was a treacherous ally," he points out, "because the fixing of texts in print affected the nature of the performance, encouraging the repetition, as opposed to the re-creation, of a song or a story. It has been suggested that literacy stunts the capacity to improvise, just as it removes some of the incentive."[41] Since women had little access to the printed word but were the creators of a rich oral culture, women's oral culture in early Europe was separate and quite different from that of men, and was to popular culture "what popular culture is to culture as a whole."[42] it is easy to see why the printing of the Italian scenes was also a threat to the creative autonomy of women artists.

Caterina's Colombina: Creator of Subversive Humor in Evaristo Gherardi's Collection of Italian Plays

The element of improvisation is crucial in ascertaining actors' and actresses' original contributions to the creation of their roles. In traditional commedia companies, each performer was responsible for the creation of her or his own role; roles were further developed onstage through the collaboration demanded by the art of the improvisation itself. A close look at the scenes and plays in the Gherardi collection provides significant clues to the nature of the actors' and actresses' performances of their roles, particularly Colombina's. In a significant number of plays, she is by far the character with the most input into the movement of the plot and the many comic layers of the plays. At the end of *Les Chinois* (*The Chinese*), it is Colombina who speaks in defense of the Italian actors—in opposition to Arlequin, who defends the French actors. The scene has an unusually meta-theatrical dimension and sounds almost like an *ars poetica* of the commedia dell'arte and French classical theatre:

> In fact, nature must make extraordinary efforts in order to produce an Italian actor for the world. A good Arlequin is *natura laborantis opus*, she bestows upon him all her treasures, and she hardly has enough spirit to animate her work. But as for the French comedians, nature makes them while sleeping; she makes them of the same dough as she makes parrots, who only repeat what they have learned by heart; instead, an Italian draws everything from his own depths, and does not borrow from anyone in order to speak, similar to these eloquent nightingales who vary their song according to their various whims.[43]

This scene follows one of the "Italian scenes" (which is improvised) in which the skills of the Italian actors are measured against those of the French. Colombina is the voice of Italian comedy itself. Her speech at the end of the play subverts the form of the play as a solid dramatic structure to be learned verbatim and extols the virtues of the Italian art of improvisation, of which she appears to be the last and most notable spokesperson. In one of her very last speeches in *Les Chinois*, Colombina proudly states that "the Italian theater is the center of freedom, the source of joy, the shelter from all domestic troubles."[44]

Colombina's speech about the particular skills of the Italian actors is almost identical to the statements made by Evaristo Gherardi himself when discussing the same issue of the difference between the Italian and the French actors in the preface to his *Le*

[41] Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 255.
[42] Ibid., 49.
[43] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 1:253 (translation mine).
[44] Ibid., 1:255.

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Théâtre italien de Gherardi. He warns his readers that they "should not expect to find in this collection whole comedies, since it is impossible to print Italian plays. The reason is that Italian actors learn nothing by heart, and that all they have to do to perform a play is to have seen the plot for a short while before going on stage." Gherardi's preface destabilizes the texts he is about to present and favors the argument that what we see in this collection is a rudimentary image of what took place onstage and therefore of the collaborative creation and improvisations of the actors themselves. Also, Luigi Riccoboni's comments about the virtues of improvised comedy echo those of Colombina. He notes that the Italian actors are more dynamic and natural in their acting, for "one feels and consequently says better that which is created than that which is borrowed from others with the help of memory."[45] So resourceful were the Italian actors in their art of improvisation that even by adapting their repertory, adding scenes to their *canevas* (scenarios), and shifting almost entirely to French in their performances, they were perceived as serious rivals to the Comédie Française and the opera.[46]

It is even more significant that it is Colombina who, in *Les Chinois*, acts as the spokesperson for the *arte* of the Italian troupes and as the alter ego of Gherardi himself. If we consider the thesis that women had a crucial role in the development of the art of improvisation in the commedia, then they also had more at stake in losing that creative freedom. Having fewer opportunities to become well educated and having significantly limited access to books and hence fewer possibilities of becoming writers themselves,[47] women would certainly be the main losers in the battle between commedia dell'arte and French classical theatre. Not to be overlooked is that Colombina's argument with Arlecchino doubles as an argument between the two forms of theatre and between two marriage opportunities for Isabelle, Colombina's mistress. Isabelle's choices are between an Italian actor and a French actor. The final judgment is left to the *parterre*, which is the public in the lower and cheaper seats—the common people. As Colombina argues for the superiority of Italian *arte*, she is simultaneously arguing for the right of Isabella to marry the man of her choice—an Italian actor, Octave. "An Italian actor will always gain over a French one. He spends less on clothes, his share is larger, and sometimes, all an Italian troupe needs is a mediocre play in order to keep an Italian actor working the whole year."[48] Colombina's argument has yet another sublevel, one that is autobiographical in nature: she is acknowledging her own poor choice in marrying a French actor, Pierre Lenoir de la Thorillère, the son of an actor from Molière's troupe, who, according to some documents, was causing her financial ruination by his extravagant ways. Further, the reputation of French actresses was not any better than that of their actor compatriots. Although France did have its own lineage of women performers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and some French noble-

[45] Ibid. For comments on this introduction, see also William D. Howarth, *French Theater in the Neo-classical Era, 1550–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 364. Riccoboni's full quote in the original (my translation in the text): "l'Acteur qui joue à l'impromptu joue plus vivement et plus naturellement que celui qui joue un Role appris: on sent mieux, et par consequent on dit mieux ce que l'on produit que ce que l'on emprunte des autres par les secours de la mémoire" (Luigi Riccoboni, *Histoire du Théâtre Italien depuis la decadence de la comédie latine* [Paris: Impr. De Delormel, 1728]), 61–62.

[46] Howarth, *French Theater in the Neo-classical Era*, 323.

[47] See Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, and Mary Beth Rose on women, literacy, and the book in early modern Europe: Rose, ed., *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

[48] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 1:254 (translation mine).

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women during this period were alleged to have been trained in the art of dancing or singing by Italian women performers, French actresses "did not enjoy the unassailable reputation for moral virtue, nor the international cachet, of their more famous Italian counterparts."[49] Also consider that Caterina's sister, Francesca-Maria (or Françoise in French) (1664–1747), who played the *innamorata* under the stage name of Isabella, had a most unfortunate marriage experience with a Frenchman whose parents disinherited him and annulled the marriage upon finding out that he had married an actress.[50]

The multilayered nature of Caterina's discourse is evidence of her creative input and extraordinary wit.[51] She mixes the fictional with the real and the aesthetic with the personal in ways that illustrate both the commedia tradition of performance and improvisation and the originality of her own voice. Caterina / Colombina illustrates the blurring of the distinctions between the real and the fictional. As Deanna Shemek has noted about female figures in the culture and literature of early modern Europe, in Caterina Biancolelli, as in Isabella Andreini a century earlier, the "blurring of the given . . . with the created [demonstrates the] inextricability of associations between women real and imagined."[52] Caterina / Colombina also blurs the distance between actors and audience, as was typical of the early commedia performers and characteristic of the art of improvisation itself. She often addresses her audience (for example, speaking to the *parterre*), and her comments are specific to different social groups within the audience. As Gustave Attinger has rightly noted, "improvisation, not unleashed and total, but within the limits of a discipline, allows the actor to better relate to the public."[53]

The play *La Coquette* offers a particularly good example of Caterina's dialogue with her audience, especially in the scene between Arlequin disguised as a marquis and Colombina, who is trying to evade the advances of the faux marquis. Their discussion turns on an issue that provoked a lot of controversy in the theatre between the years 1680 and 1710: namely, the practice of allowing spectators to sit upon the stage. Colombina criticizes the practice and defends the good judgments of the people and the *parterre,* stating that, "the parterre does everyone good. It corrects authors and keeps actors on their toes. A fop does not parade himself on the stage seats in front of it with impunity. . . . Do you really think that people in the parterre pay their fifteen sols to watch you comb your wig, take snuff and wander about the stage?" At the end of the exchange the marquis admits that he wants to keep his place onstage, and that he only pays his "*écu* [in order] to walk around and to swirl around the actresses."[54]

[49] Melinda J. Cough, "Courtly Comédiantes: Henrietta Maria and Amateur Women's Stage Plays in France and England," in *Women Players in England, 1500–1660*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005). The information about Caterina Biancolelli's husband is given in Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, 257.

[50] See the Parfaicts, *Histoire de l'ancien théâtre italien*, on Isabella and Caterina Biancolelli and the full story of Isabella's trials.

[51] This should have put the seventeenth-century British writer Congreve to utter shame for his claim that women are entirely devoid of wit and the ability to produce humor. Congreve said in 1695 that "I have never made any observation of what I apprehend to be true Humour in Women." See John Hodges, ed., *William Congreve: Letters and Documents* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

[52] Shemek, *Ladies Errant*, 2

[53] Gustave Attinger, *L'Esprit de la commedia dell'arte dans le théâtre français* (Paris: Librairie théâtrale, 1950), 58: "L'improvisation, non pas débridée et totale, permet à l'acteur de mieux se soucier d'etre avec son public" (translation mine).

[54] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 2:255.

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His admission that his principal reason for going to the theatre is to flaunt his clothes and "swirl" around the actresses onstage marks the beginning of an era in which the actress degenerated into mere prey, the object of lust for the marquis and others like him. Colombina's criticism of the practice is revolutionary, indicating both the dialogue she maintains with the audience and upholding the integrity of the actress.

While she is defending Isabella's right to marry the man of her choice and the rights of actresses to be treated with respect, she is also taking upon herself the male part of the argument. She argues in the name of the male suitor, Octave, for she believes that "in a dispute, a woman is always worth more than a man."[55] Andrea Perucci, in his *Dell'arte rappresentativa*, provides ample examples of *contrasti* (dialogues) and *rimproveri* (arguments) of the female *zanna* character, also called *fantesca*. As he notes, the *fantesca* needs to be vivacious, spirited, energetic, and young; the *rimproveri* of Colombina's precursor, the Italian *fantesca*, are fiery, full of reproaches, and usually directed at Arlecchino, who invariably proves unfaithful in love, as in the play *Colombine avocat pour et contre* (*Colombina Lawyer For and Against*).[56]

As a performer in an Italian troupe, Caterina defends the interests and the art of the commedia; as a woman, she is doubly invested in the survival of the Italian theatre, speaking both in the name of actresses and of women in general. Her voice, which is as combative as it is sly, has a separate tone from that of the other performers—especially the male performers, possibly reflecting the separation in popular culture between the female and male voices. As she says in the play *La Fille de bon sens* (*The Girl of Common Sense*), she is on a mission "to vindicate all women, [for] it shall not be said that Colombina stays her arms akimbo when an insult is brought upon the female sex."[57]

Although transformed in comparison with their Renaissance ancestors, seventeenth-century commedia troupes such as Fiorelli-Locatelli's were still functioning and working within the same system of collaboration, equality, and impromptu creation that had made the early troupes the sensation of Europe. One conspicuous quality of the early troupes was precisely the fact that women had equal rights with men within the company, and their creative input was highly encouraged and cherished. Critics such as Adriano Valerini noted on the occasion of the death of the famous actress Vincenza Armani that "she succeeded better speaking improvisationally than the most consummate authors do upon contemplation."[58] Tomaso Garzoni wrote that "the women, imitating the Ciceronian art made the comic art like oratory."[59] By arguing for her mistress's right to marry the man of her choice and for the superiority of the Italian performers over the French, and by weaving her own and her sister's personal stories of disappointing marriages to Frenchmen into the discussion of performance and improvisational skills, Caterina is also arguing for the rights of women to participate

[55] Ibid.

[56] See the study by Andrea Perucci, *Dell'arte rappresentativa, premeditata ed all' improviso* (Naples: Nella Nuova Stampa din Michele Luigi Mutio, 1699). This is a primary source of the working methods of a typical commedia dell'arte troupe.

[57] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 4:155.

[58] Quoted in McGill, "Women and Performance," 64.

[59] Quoted in ibid. See also Tomasso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo, nobili e ignobile* (Venice: Gio. Battista Somasco, 1585). Here, Garzoni praises the improvisational and poetic skills of the famous sixteenth-century actresses, Vittoria Piissimi and Isabella Andreini.

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equally in the artistic life of society and to manage their own lives. She is symbolizing onstage, through the creation of her own character, the creative freedom that was, sadly, soon to be lost. In the play *Les Chinois*, the Italians are, ironically, the very symbol of artistic and gender equality, whereas the French, as represented by Arlequin, symbolize bad husbands, gender inequality, and the parrot-like theatrical art of performing written, memorized texts. The fact should not be overlooked that in many of the plays, Arlequin is an unfaithful lover and a liar who often pretends to be someone else only in order to deceive Colombina. If the Italians were the first to allow women on their stages to act and create comedy and to shine with their improvisational genius, it was the French who, having appropriated the actress mostly as an object of the male gaze, significantly undermined her creative freedom.

Colombina links Italian theatre with Italian marriage and French theatre with French marriage, which is also significant. The Italian theatre was based on true partnerships between spouses, as the history of the commedia troupes illustrates. The couple Isabella and Francesco Andreini had been a superb example of true partnership in the theatre. Caterina's grandmother Isabella Franchini and her second husband, C. Cantu, creatively reflected their passion through riveting plots and poetry onstage, while Caterina's own parents, Domenico and Orsola, were famous for their collaborative work in the company and for how harmoniously and ingeniously they channeled their marital relationship into theatrical creativity.[60] Later, Caterina herself blurred the distinctions onstage between the *zanna* and the *innamorata* by being at times the lover of the master or of the *innamorato*, and not of Arlequin.

In her pro-Italian theatre tirades, Caterina/Colombina deliberately blurs distinctions between theatre and life, with theatre not only being a metaphor for life, but also setting an example for it. In their boldness and harsh irony, her speeches seem to foreshadow the twentieth-century feminist notion that the emancipation of women at the turn of the century is significantly connected to their access and contribution to public performance and their courage in making themselves into a "spectacle." In her ground breaking study *Female Spectacle*, Susan Glenn notes that "in a crucial epoch of historical upheaval, female performers became agents and metaphors of changing gender relations," as popular theater was becoming "a venue for acting out and staging the cultural, social and political assertions as well as the anxieties associated with the era of the New Woman."[61] Similarly, Catherine Biancolelli's les-

[60] Carlo Cantu, with the stage name of Buffetto, writes playful and sensuous poetry for his wife Isabella in *Cicalamento in canzonnette ridicolose, overo trattato di matrimonio trà buffetto e Colombina comici*. Quoted by Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi: Dall'inferno*, 257. As for Domenico Biancolelli, although he played the role of a *zanni,* and Orsola the role of an "amoureuse," and although traditionally it was not common for the two to be amorously involved with each other onstage, they often rearranged the plots "to give the two the opportunity to play together as much as possible" (Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte in Paris*, 103). Also, for full renditions of scenarios and plays of the Italian actors and for information about the different troupes and the roles they played, see Vito Pandolfi, *La commedia dell'arte: Storia e testi*, 6 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1957). Particularly pertinent for this study is vol. 4 of Pandolfi's *La commedia dell'arte,* for the scenario in which Isabella Franchini—now Isabella Cantu—acts as Colombina next to her second husband, Carlo Cantu, as well as for the poems, songs in the play, and the passionate love letters between the two spouses (151–56). See also Domenico Biancolelli, *Arlequiniana, ou les bons mots, les histories plaisantes et agréables, recueillies des conversations d'Arlequin* (Paris: Florentin et Pierre Delaulne, 1694).

[61] See Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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sons in performance, coquettish behavior and public assertiveness offer a model of the emancipated seventeenth-century "New Woman." Furthermore, her ironic use of personal details echoes the comedy of the modern female stand-up comedian, who is "willing to make a spectacle of her own problems in order to poke fun at the state of modern gender relations."[62]

Although often the lover, fiancée, or wife of Arlecchino, and at times exhibiting similar comic features (like the propensity for trickery), Colombina is not really a female version of him. While Arlecchino's comedy derives largely from a mixture of stupidity, vulgarity, physical adroitness, and basic cunning vis-à-vis his masters,[63] Colombina produces a subtler kind of humor through her sharp wit, cunning, and spirit of revolt against men—in particular, older, tyrannical ones—as well as through her often whimsical, coquettish behavior. Nonetheless Arlecchino and Colombina act in disguise and cross-dress more often than any of the other characters in Italian comedy. They are also always ready and eager to trick their masters or each other, but, as Scott has noted, Colombina is always "successful and never gets caught,"[64] while Arlecchino is often the one tricked in the end by Colombina herself.

Finally, one last significant element in support of the argument that Caterina Biancolelli had substantial input into the creation of the role of Colombina in the Gherardi texts is the fact that her wit, subversive humor, transgressive comedy, and rebellion against a fixed definition of women's roles in society form a continuous aesthetic and psychological thread across plays by different playwrights. The Colombina of Palaprat's *La Fille de bon sens* is equally as emancipated, witty, and a defender of women's rights as the Colombina of Regnard and Dufresny's *Les Chinois*, as the Colombina of Regnard's *Le Divorce*, as the Colombina of Delosme de Montchesnay's *Les Souhaits*, or as the Colombina of Fatouville's *Colombine avocat pour et contre*. Her voice, actions, tricks, and disguises come together in, and emerge from, all these plays into a larger-than-life character with distinctive traits and an unmistakable personality that attest to the effervescent creativity of the actress herself. The analysis that follows traces the contours of this vibrant portrait and nature of Caterina's comedic genius.

Colombina's (Re-)Construction of Gender

Colombina's many disguises, which typically involve cross-dressing, and her various "performance lessons" to mistress/friend/sister Isabella or Angélique illustrate the idea mentioned above: that women's comedy often "accommodates, and/or promotes change." In terms of the humor derived from these disguises and lessons, Caterina's Colombina reflects the comic strategy advocated by Norma Gravely to "write our own jokes . . . and fight back."[65] Colombina aggressively challenges the gender hierarchies of her time, and, through her performance, often produces a welcome subversion of

[62] Ibid., 59.

[63] Duchartre, *La commedia dell'arte*, 118–22.

[64] Scott is right in pointing out that Colombina is no servile maid character and that she expresses herself with extraordinary ease, even with insolence, vis-à-vis her masters. Furthermore she is cunning and at times harsh, and she has no scruples in tricking the old husbands and foolish old lovers to the advantage of the love interests of her mistress, much in the tradition of the *zanna* or *fantesca* described by Perucci in his performance guide (*Dell'arte rappresentativa*) for the commedia dell'arte troupes.

[65] Quoted in Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 34.

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them. She seems to invite the modern feminist critic to interpret her actions in light of contemporary theories of gender and performance.

In the analyses that follow, I hope to show that, in the seventeenth century, Caterina's Colombina demonstrated "the performativity of gender" and challenged the idea that gender roles have an essential or immutable basis in so-called masculine and feminine natures. Through her performance, she destabilizes and reconstructs the feminine gender in fluid and revolutionary ways that, if exemplified in society, would give women more power and freedom. As Judith Butler argued in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, the notion "that gender is performative . . . sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender, is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body."[66]

Colombina makes use of, parodies, and subverts precisely the various "sets of acts [and] stylization of the body" that have all too often been the source of gender inequalities. Colombina consistently attempts to overcome and dismantle the social, cultural, and legal injustices associated with "one set of acts" or another, while at the same time denouncing at every step the arbitrary nature of gender hierarchies and the abuses of power inherent in them. Feminist performance theorists and critics have used Butler's theory of the "performativity of gender" with some consistency to show precisely how performance and theatre offer the ideal medium for demonstrating, playing, and destabilizing accepted gender lines. In discussing Isabella Andreini's performance, Melissa Vickery-Bareford points out precisely how Isabella "used her performance to challenge existing gender constructions and to negotiate a new construction for herself. Manipulating gender construction, Isabella fashioned a gender that would accommodate the attributes necessary to attain immortality."[67] Feminist performance theorists such as Ellen Donkin, and Jill Dolan have used the notion of the performativity of gender to explode essentialist interpretations of gender roles and, most importantly, to provide performers with the theoretical basis for the practical de-emphasis of gender in performance.[68] Dolan in particular has analyzed the ways in which performers can "maintain or destroy the mirror of gender roles" through the impersonation of gender onstage.[69]

However, when applying modern theories to a seventeenth-century artist, one has to be consistently mindful of the socio-historical context of the artist's time and neither get too carried away with nor too disappointed in what we may perceive today as either feminist or non-feminist attitudes. Some of Colombina's lines and actions seemed radical even to my feminist undergraduate students, while some other of her lines and actions, particularly her unabashed preaching of the use of artifice and coquettish behavior so as to have her way, are frowned upon by most modern feminists and regarded as other forms of women reinforcing traditional feminine ways.[70] Caterina Biancolelli's

[66] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

[67] Bareford, "Isabella Andreini," 148.

[68] See Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, eds., *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater As If Gender and Race Matter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Acting Out: Feminist Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[69] See Jill Dolan, "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?" in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992).

[70] See the book by Patricia Phillippy, *Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases, and Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Phillippy offers a fascinating exploration of the

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seventeenth-century France was a place in which the emancipation of women was celebrated on many levels of social and cultural life, but that also experienced a backlash against women, their rights, and their contributions. James Collins notes that "the period 1550 to 1700 was one of critical change for women. Early modern women engaged in activities ranging from food retailing to running ferry boats, but their public position took a dramatic turn for the worse after 1550."[71] While many women headed households and contributed in significant ways to the overall economy, they were also significantly more prone to poverty than men and were subjected to draconian laws restricting their rights to own property and to make choices regarding the regulation of their personal lives. With respect to the visual arts, the French Royal Academy of the seventeenth century as well as many art historians and critics marginalized and denigrated the so-called feminine elements in order to enhance what was perceived of as the masculine aspects of art creation. They also advanced the theory that the downplaying of the feminine and the extolling of the masculine were indispensable to the intellectual standing of the Academy.[72]

On the other hand, on the literary level, seventeenth-century France offered the unique concept of *salons*—literary circles or gatherings hosted and created almost entirely by aristocratic women—where France's most revered authors exchanged ideas and first made names for themselves. Many of the celebrated women hosting the salons, such as Madame de la Fayette, Madame de Rambouillet, and Madame de Sablé, were also the initiators of the seventeenth-century movement called *préciosité*, which consisted of women talking freely about issues of love, passion, and marital relations. According to Kimberly Cashman, "the précieuses are constructing a social role for women in which they progress toward legal and social equality with men."[73] Faith Beasley underscores the extraordinary influence on the production of culture by women who hosted salons; they were both arbiters of taste and literary critics. She points out that "Salon criticism was primarily an oral activity" that was characterized by "the collaborative nature of literary evaluation."[74]

Similarly, a century earlier, it was also the women performers who, by using their rich heritage of oral culture and performative skills, developed and brought to unprecedented heights the improvisational comedy of the genre, while developing the working style of collective and collaborative theatrical creation. Further, Lewis Seifert argues that the production of fairytales in France, two-thirds of which were authored by women, simultaneously reinforced traditional gender roles and subverted them, which suggests "the instability of patriarchy at a decisive moment in the history of French literature and culture."[75]

visual forms of *coquetterie*, of the representation and self-representation of women and of various forms of artifices used by women in the service of their femininity, as inscribed within the larger context of cultural constructs. This is particularly pertinent for the study of performance and of the various sexual and artistic negotiations in which actresses had to engage.

[71] James Collins, "The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 2 (1989): 436–70.

[72] Lianne McTavish, "Complicating Categories: Women, Gender, and Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century French Visual Culture" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1996).

[73] Kimberly Cashman, *Staging Subversions: The Performance-Within-a-Play in French Classical Theater* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 67.

[74] Faith E. Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 30–31.

[75] Lewis C. Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690–1715: Nostalgic Utopias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

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It was also in seventeenth-century France that the term *coquette* was coined, denoting "a woman who gains power over others by manipulative verbal and body language, a skill referred to as her 'art.'" Paradoxically, as Natasha Sajé points out, the etymology of the word comes from "cock," thus suggesting an aggressive maleness, which is in ironic contrast to the understanding of a coquette as someone who exaggerates the traditionally "female" fault of artifice.[76]

Colombina's use of the artifice of the coquette, and her lessons on how to gain power in society by using the coquette's art, illustrate to a certain degree Derrida's view that there is "affirmative power" in the dissimulations and deceits women may use to have their way. While such artifices are usually viewed critically by modern feminists as precisely reinforcing the signs of femininity imposed upon women by patriarchy, the deliberate use of such practices and signs in an exaggerated manner by Colombina, in a society that deprived women of their most basic rights such as choosing their life mates or owning property, is rather a lesson in survival and has, indeed, an affirmative power.[77] To this, one can appropriately add Luce Irigaray's claim that "one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to thwart it."[78]

Colombina uses the signs of both the feminine and masculine genders with great deliberation; she destabilizes both and performs them with panache in order to obtain personal fulfillment, power, justice, and even at times to satisfy her own vindictiveness. In Palaprat's *La Fille de bon sens*, she cross-dresses as a lieutenant, a captain, and a government representative so that she and her mistress can obtain the spouses of their choice. She also punishes Octave, Mezzetin, and Pierrot, giving them a good lesson that will probably make them think twice before insulting and mistreating women. In Regnard's *La Coquette*, she gives her "loutish," "boorish" suitor a memorable lesson by tricking him into dressing like a woman on the grounds that he first has to be accepted into the "women's Academy" to which she belongs.[79] The "acceptance ritual" consists of the women in the so-called Academy dressing the marquis as a woman. Colombina then introduces her suitor to her father, who abruptly changes his tyrannical desire to have him as a son-in-law to a flat refusal of his marriage proposal. The play ends without the traditional integrative function of marriage, but simply with Colombina's grin of satisfaction at having retained her freedom. In *Le Divorce,* she is the author of an elaborate mise-en-scène in which Arlequin and several other characters perform an outrageous legal masquerade with the purpose of getting her mistress Isabella separated from her old and tyrannical husband Sotinet.

The most striking example of the criticism of men and patriarchy is to be found in Delosme de Montchesnay's *Les Souhaits* (*The Desires*). Isabella's unrestrained criticism of the society and rules imposed by men upon women is mirrored each time by Colombina's lessons of survival. To Isabella's complaint that men are "traitors" who have deprived women of a place in society and prevented them from participating in the life of finances, government, and all other work, Colombina answers that since it

[76] Natasha Sajé, "'Artful Artlessness': Reading the Coquette in Roderick Hudson," *Henry James Review* 18, no. 2 (1997): 161–72.

[77] Jacques Derrida, *Spurs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[78] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[79] See Griffiths's analysis (in "Sunset") of Colombina and of this episode in the play from Gherardi.

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is not the lack of military aptitude that keeps women from heading armies, they can pursue their own wars by means of deception, role-playing, and turning their own marginalization into a means of vengeance: "If men have wronged us by appropriating all positions, these same positions can serve us every day as a place of vengeance."[80] If, as Isabella argues, women have been deprived of freedom and if every move toward emancipation has been regarded as a crime, then, according to Colombina, women must learn how to feign prudishness and innocence, to play their femininity for all its worth and thus learn how to turn each situation to their advantage. Colombina's tirade is a lesson in both behavior and performance:

> For example, if one shows us a scandalous cigarette box, we place our hand over our eyes, but it is only in order to make a pair of binoculars with our fingers; if one sings to us a vaudeville [that is] a little risqué, we pretend to avert our eyes, but it is in order to better receive it with our ears. We are caught in the middle of an outrageous reading, well we only have to blush a little which will only enhance our beauty. This is how women have the pleasure without ever experiencing the shame; while for men, pleasure is always followed by shame.[81]

The two women concur on the many indiscretions and injustices committed by men in society: from the way in which they harass all pretty women in the street, to the ways in which they arbitrarily change the faces of states and countries. Colombina concludes that men have to be regarded like doctors: take advantage of their cures, but know their foibles. The scene concludes with Colombina's bitingly sarcastic remark: "Oh, I will now run to wash my mouth, for I've been talking long enough about men."[82]

Colombina's irony and sense of superiority reflect the strategies of a trickster who knows how to use each situation to her advantage; her main survival strategy is the disguise, and her anger at the abuses of power in a patriarchal society is channeled into cunning ways of negotiating that power. Her survival comedy is subversive of patriarchy to the extent to which it offers a set of rules by which both she and her mistress, and women in general, can turn the disadvantages of their inferior social positions to a relatively more advantageous place in society.[83]Colombina's lesson in the performativity of gender and her attempts at reconstructing the feminine gender may also be seen as an illustration *avant la lettre* of what Luce Irigaray has called "mimesis-mimicry"—that is, exaggerated playing and mimicking of the signs of femininity imposed by men upon women in order to subvert and free oneself from those very signs.[84] Colombina's coquettish behavior and lessons in being a coquette must be seen

[80] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 4:32.

[81] Ibid., 4:33.

[82] Ibid., 4:35.

[83] Gloria Kaufman distinguishes between two forms of women's humor: "mainstream women's humor," which in her view is often "survival humor," and "feminist humor," which "inspires changes [and] is obviously concerned with the transfer of power from those who have it overwhelmingly to those who have too little"; see Kaufman, *In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), viii.

[84] According to Irigaray, since the mimetic tradition of Western forms of representation, starting with Plato and Aristotle down to the present day, have enclosed women within the discourse of lack and presented them as objects of male desire and the male gaze, one way for women to resist and escape from this fatal enclosure is to mimic the mimetic modes of representation imposed upon them. This can be done through exaggerated thickening or caricaturing of the very norms and forms of femininity imposed upon women socially, culturally, and aesthetically, or in the extreme form of hysteria.

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in the context of the extreme forms of oppression suffered by women in the society of seventeenth-century France, and also—perhaps paradoxically, in light of the signs of emancipation—the accomplishments and struggles of seventeenth-century French women to subvert precisely these forms of oppression. Colombina finds herself, from the point of view of the condition of women in French society, on the border between oppression and emancipation, revolution and backlash. Through her ironic voice and performance tricks she does her best to withstand the backlash, rebel against the oppression, and ride the wave of emancipation.[85]

Colombina's cynicism toward both a highly romantic view of marriage and the prospect of simply staying married reflects the practical sense of the trickster whose principal goal is usually to undermine the authority of his or her masters, or, in the case of women, to subvert the authority of the men who dominate society while simultaneously obtaining financial gain and personal pleasure for themselves. Skeptical about any kind of match for her mistress, particularly matches made for love, Columbina's advice to Angélique is always on the side of practicality: "From whatever side the money may come, it always smells good."[86] The subtext of many of Colombina's teachings about marrying rich men, even if they are not young or handsome, is that once one is financially secure, romance is possible outside of marriage. Again, this is very much the strategy of courtesans, for whom performance was not only part of their profession, but also a way of life; they had to negotiate between their private and public personas, between erotic involvement and financial stability, and among their various benefactors.

Colombina's philosophy departs significantly from that of the early commedia female characters whose tricks, disguises, and other comic strategies were always meant to lead to marriages of love. Neither does her comedy reflect the philosophy of Molière's maids, who generally try to guide their mistresses away from marrying rich old men. Her lifestyle resembles to some degree to the Renaissance courtesans, whose financial stability was generally ensured by a rich benefactor, who was usually older, and under whose protection they enjoyed both a certain sexual and financial freedom and had access to the education and public life from which most other women were excluded.

When necessary, Colombina is as much an advocate for marriage as she is for breaking one up. In *Le Divorce* (*The Divorce*), she invents the comic stratagem of a trial presided over by none other than "le Dieu Hymène," who is in town "to de-marry all the persons who are weary of marriage."[87] More than anything, Colombina supports that which is in a woman's best interest in a world that does not treat women fairly.

[85] See Cashman, *Staging Subversions*, 33. In her discussion of Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes*, Cashman makes the astute remark that "the performance-within-the play is also associated with conflicts in which women resist the gender-based roles imposed by men in authority." Whether it was Molière who, after a fourteen-year period of touring France as part of a commedia troupe and after many contacts and brushes with Italian comedy, "pirated" and introduced many of the theatre-grams, plot structures, and sauciness of many of the female characters of the Italian theatre into his own theatre, or whether it was the Italian actresses and actors who were adding various influences from Molière to their repertoire, or a sort of spiraling of theatrical influence, is arguable. See also Virginia Scott, *Molière: A Theatrical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[86] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 2:108.

[87] Ibid., 2:164.

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Colombina values financial stability and a certain freedom of movement; thus she urges her mistress to look after them as well. This also resembles the courtesans who, in sixteenth-century Venice, were often envied both for their freedom and economic opulence.[88] Colombina the coquette is a cynical French courtesan of sorts, whose laughter often turns into sarcasm and who is equally skilled at playing matchmaker and match-breaker.

As Scott has noted, Caterina Biancolelli "developed the modern, cynical, immoral, and successful young French woman, linked to the Dorines and Toinettes of Molière, but younger, smoother, and more certainly devoted to the feminine cause in the eternal war of the sexes."[89] She teaches women how to succeed in a man's world, to take justice into their own hands, and, by means of trickery, to obtain what otherwise is barred to them. As she tutors her mistress Isabella in how to experience the public life from which women have been excluded by performing a variety of coquettish gestures and movements that will allow her mistress to negotiate her relations with men to her own advantage, Colombina is in fact teaching her, as well as women in the audience, how best to play her feminine cards in order to obtain what she desires.

When she cross-dresses (whether to punish unfaithful lovers as in *Colombina avocat pour et contre* (*Colombina Lawyer For and Against*), to get rid of unwanted husbands or suitors, or to obtain the husbands of their choice for herself and her mistress), Colombina teaches women to assume the power that comes with the dress. Her cross-dressing, which reflects a "critique of maleness,"[90] is used for much the same goal as female-to-male cross-dressing in modern theatre: "To protest the injustices caused by the sex-gender system."[91] This is particularly conspicuous in the trial scene of *La Fille de bon sens* (*The Girl of Common Sense*) where, in the guise of the government representative (*commissaire*) running the procedure, she pokes fun at the corruption of the legal system with such unforgiving humor: "Let us observe the judicial order well and, provided that no one offers us money in order to stop the course of justice, let us begin our procedure."[92] She punishes those who have insulted her and her mistress, gets rid of the unwanted suitors, and, as a result, both women end up fully vindicated and with the husbands of their choice. Colombina claims to be the teacher of the most famous coquettes from all over Paris. At the end of her lesson to Angélique, she rather cynically suggests that, just as hunters display various parts of the bodies of their conquered prey on their doors, so women should display "the claws of the man of justice," "the talons of the banker," and the "linnet of the abbot on theirs."[93]

In Gherardi's collection, Colombina seems to be sexually experienced in comparison with her innocent mistresses, Isabella and Angélique. Colombina has inherited many of the traits of the Venetian *cortegiane oneste*, or "honest courtesans" both in character and in modes of performance: she is more sexually experienced than the *innamorata* or ingénue character, she often dances and sings onstage (*La Coquette*, *Les Souhaits*),

[88] See Rosenthal's chapter, "Satirizing the Courtesan," in *The Honest Courtesan*.

[89] Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, 307.

[90] Bonnie Marranca, Elinor Fuchs, and Gerald Rabkin, "The Politics of Representation: New York Theater Season, 1990–1991," *Performing Arts Journal* 39 (1991): 14.

[91] Lesley Ferris, ed., *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993), 41.

[92] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 4:191.

[93] Ibid., 4:109. The interesting pun here is that *linnet* in French also means "scatterbrain."

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and she possesses knowledge in areas varying from law to literature to philosophy, which she uses in trickery. As she says to Isabella in *Le Divorce,* she has "une peste de tête" (a plague of a head).[94] Like the Italian "honest courtesans," "whose combination of sexual freedom, learning and cultural sophistication made them indispensable participants in the courtly social life of the Italian Renaissance,"[95] Colombina is an entertainer in the fullest sense of the word. In order to get her mistress to agree to some of her stratagems or to separate from her husband, Colombina summons the examples of other women tricksters, famous courtesans, and poets and philosophers (*Le Divorce*). Rather than being influenced in the creation of her character by French writers, she is bringing her own Italian heritage of oral-history performance and attitudes into French culture. This may be another reason why she argues so vehemently in the name of Italian theatre and Italian husbands in the play *Les Chinois*. She then combines this Italian heritage with the tricks of the coquette and the self-confidence and refinement of the *précieuses*.

In *La Coquette*, also called *L'Académie des dames* (*The Academy of Women*), Colombina creates a masquerade to end all masquerades by staging the mise-en-scène of cross-dressing for the fatuous and arrogant marquis. Colombina, like the courtesan, is here not only the performer, but also the creator and director of her own performance, and through her voice the voices of deceived women, objectified actresses, dissatisfied wives, and oppressed daughters speak. Her comedy does not provide integrative closure, but rather disintegrates and explodes accepted notions of women's fulfillment and virtue. Although Colombina attempts to help Isabella find a spouse, no marriage plans for her are mentioned at the end of the play. Rather than the fixed script of marriage, she chooses the coquette's freedom of improvising. Although she is a sincere advocate of the improvisatory nature of classic commedia, Colombina rejects the fixed endings of the genre, which usually culminate in marriage. She blends the old with the new and the classical with the modern to suit her own sense of self and have the last laugh. Colombina's defense of the creative improvisation characteristic of the Italian theatre and her vehement attack on the French theatre for its rigid reliance on text are paralleled, at the sexual level, by the performance tricks she seems always to have up her sleeve as the queen of Parisian coquettes and, ultimately, by her cunning avoidance of the fixity of marriage altogether.

Colombina's Carousel of Improvisation

One last significant bit of evidence concerning Caterina's originality in the creation of her character and the subversive dimension of her comedy also relates to theatrical improvisation. In Fattouville's *Colombine avocat pour et contre* (*Colombina Lawyer For and Against*) the actress changes no less than five disguises in a single scene; she also mixes French with Italian and speaks in a Gascon dialect and in a funny imitation of Spanish. Colombina's goal in the scene is to punish Arlequin for his unfaithfulness. She uses the most varied disguises, impersonating both men and women of various nationalities, ethnic groups, and professions—appearing as a French servant, a Gascon woman, an Arab or Mauresque slave woman, and a doctor. She also tricks Arlequin by replacing his head in a portrait and in a mirror with her own. Colombina's rapid succession of disguises and tricks follows a certain pattern of covering and uncovering

[94] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 2:164 (translation mine).
[95] Shemek, *Ladies Errant*, 161.

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and at the climactic point of each mini-scene, just when Arlequin has revealed another of his dishonest plans, she reveals her true identity with incantatory verses uttered in Italian: "Perfido, traditore, m'avrai negli occhi, se non m'hai nel core" (Perfidious, traitor, you will have me in your eyes if you don't want me in your heart).[96]

This rapid succession of disguises, tricks, and grimaces, punctuated by repetitive formulae suggest Perucci's guidelines with regard to "*gestualita*": the totality of gestures that produce laughter and that the actors must use in abundance. Disguises, the use of swords, and the use of ridiculous ornaments and gestures are among the many stage devices he lists. Colombina not only employs an overwhelming array of disguises, but also makes use of a sword against Arlequin when she is dressed up as a Mauresque slave woman and drives him crazy by appearing and disappearing and doubling his image in the portrait and the mirror. It is noteworthy that this gesture in particular is one of the *lazzis* used by Italian actors and was probably performed in Paris in 1685, at which time Caterina was officially employed in the *troupe italienne*.[97]

Colombina's tricks and disguises in this play are similar to those of the early commedia plots and scenarios developed and performed by Isabella Andreini. For instance, much of the burlesque in the scene derives from the large number of disguises and props Colombina employs. The objects and costumes in the scene are similar to the "properties" listed at the beginning of each scenario in Flaminio Scala's collection, *Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte*: costumes for various occasions, both male and female, of which one, the Mauresque costume used here by Colombina, resembles Isabella's disguises as Gypsy dancer and Persian astrologer. Other props include a sword, a mirror, the frame for a painting, some of which also appear in the lists of properties in Scala's scenarios.

At the linguistic and rhythmic level of voice, Colombina's incantatory formula and Arlequin's exclamations of fear clearly illustrate a system of improvisation in which actors possess a set of memorized texts, dialogues, and lines (in verse, prose, or both) and use them according to the needs of the plot and in perfect collaboration with one another. The fact that Colombina's lines are in verse and that there are rhythmic cadences and rhymes in some of the dialogues between Colombina and Arlequin further strengthens the improvisational and oral quality of the scene. As McGill and other experts of oral literature have noted, most improvisation is in verse, both for very obvious mnemonic reasons and because a large part of improvisation often derives from lyric poetry.[98] The rhetorical figures of gradation, antithesis, and accumulation specific to oral poetry and improvisation are used in the Italian, as well as in some of the French lines exchanged between Arlequin and Colombina in this scene.[99]

[96] Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi*, 1:372 (translation mine).

[97] Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983). According to Gordon's classification of *lazzis*, this gesture is part of the *lazzis* of stage properties.

[98] Albert Lord Bates, *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). For a detailed analysis of the systems of improvisation developed by the Italian actors, see the study by Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), particularly the chapter titled "Early Actresses," which is relevant to the discussion of Caterina Biancolelli's art. What Henke says about Isabella Andreini's art is also relevant for that of Biancolelli: namely, that "her deservedly praised art was forged from a generative synthesis of literature and oral performance traditions" (105).

[99] McGill, "Improvisatory Competence," 119.

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Colombina builds up her line by starting with a set of double invectives. The first, "*perfido, traditore*" (perfidious, traitor) is followed by an antithetic syntactical structure, "*m'avrai . . . se non m'hai*" (you will have me . . . if you don't have me). Arlequin answers with an accumulation of exclamations: "*hoime/ainto/spiriti/demoni/larve*" (wow me/oh my/the ghost/the devil/worms) that pick up the aural cues of both assonance and consonance in Colombina's line (the repetition of the vowels *i* and *o* and of the liquid consonants *r* and *l*).The set of aural cues and rhetorical figures set to a well-balanced rhythm illustrate what McGill has called a "basic rhythmic structure of parallelism."[100] The melodic quality of the exchange, enhanced by both assonance and alliteration, reflects the cueing characteristic of collaborative improvisation. This system of cueing is similar to the one described by McGill: "What is of special interest to the cueing of performance is the way in which these assonant/consonant markers function at the beginning and end of alternating lines of dialogue, so that the responding speaker picks up the sound of the final words of the other, and uses it to construct his or her reply."[101]

With regard to the comic dimensions of Colombina's performance, this scene reflects a vindictive, angry streak. According to Judy Little, anger and subversion of the status quo are particularly characteristic of women's comedy. Little argues that a significant amount of the comedy created by women derives from the liminality of women in society; it is a comedy that "mocks the deepest possible norms, norms four thousand years old."[102] There is also a hint of madness in Colombina's behavior and speech, which is shown by the precipitous changes in her appearance, personality, accent, and language. This gives a sense of breakdown and rupture—a sure signal of the hysteric who dismantles and collapses linguistic as well as social order: "the paradigmatic rebel against reality-testing," in Regina Barreca's words.[103] Colombina shows that "comedy is dangerous."[104] The incantatory line she throws in Arlequin's face with each new disguise has a menacing and painful edge to it. The "hysteric often laughs even as

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid., 120. Colombina's incantation and the exchanges between her and Arlequin are also reminiscent of the "greetings," or *saluti*, and the *rimproveri* (reproaches, scolding) that Perucci includes in his *Dell'arte rappresentativa*, to be used by the character of the female servant (or *fantesca*) and, respectively, of certain parts of the dialogues proposed by him for the roles of the *innamorati*. The greeting of the Tuscan servant and the *rimprovero* to the servant are particularly relevant, the first one due to its accumulation of insults and the alliterative nature of the pejorative words used by the servant, and the second one due to the vindictive tone and language that make it sound almost like a curse. The greeting of the servant is to the *zanni*, who is her lover and who is represented as a traitor or unfaithful; the lines in the traditional greeting alternate between praises and the expression of her love, and insults and expressions of her rage. The last line of the Tuscan servant's greeting is particularly relevant to our discussion: she calls her lover "*bove, becco, caval, porco et somaro*" ("cow, cuckold, horse, swine and ass"). Colombina's argument with Arlecchino also reflects the collaborative work brought to perfection by the Italian actors. Riccoboni notes, in his *Histoire du Théâtre Italien*, that in the Italian comedy, "the best actors depend entirely on those with whom they are dialoguing" (62) (translation mine). And we should bear in mind that Caterina was the daughter of Domenico Biancolelli, the most famous Arlecchino of all times, and that she also learned her art from her father.

[102] Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 4. See also the chapter by Little, "Humoring the Sentence: Women's Dialogic Comedy," in *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Morris (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).

[103] Regina Barreca, *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1988).

[104] Ibid., 15.

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she howls," notes Barreca.[105] Colombina's carousel of languages and impersonations is like a carnival gone sour. The note of madness connects this Colombina, historically, with Isabella Andreini and the first commedia actresses who, a century earlier, had developed mad scenes as important components of their theatrical repertoires and as stepping stones for their performance art.

In a profound way, Colombina's performances of three hundred years ago, which used "gender to undo gender," were exactly what theorists like Judith Lorber have been seeking. In an article published in 2000, Lorber called for "a feminist degendering movement [that would] do away with gender divisions altogether."[106] And Jill Dolan's suggestion that today's theatre critic, teacher, or spectator should in fact pay attention to "who's there (or who appears to be there), using and surpassing metaphors of performativity" seems well suited to the analysis of Caterina's Colombina.[107] Ultimately, Colombina and her "tricks" seem to urge us to view her in the full flamboyance of her female power and in the richness of her humanity, beyond gender lines and past all her disguises.

In conclusion, the new Colombina is a female trickster who is very much the creation of Caterina Biancolelli herself. The great paradox of Caterina's character is that in *Les Chinois*, it is Colombina—the newest character of the commedia—who represents the Italian theatre, which was now more than a century-and-a-half old, while Arlequin, the oldest and most representative character of the traditional commedia dell'arte, is the spokesperson for the French theatre. It is the old that is modern, and the modern that is old. This kind of reversal is characteristic of periods of backlash. With respect to women, the would-be modern French theatre represents a form of backlash against their acquired freedoms, while the Italian traditional theatre, paradoxically, is an artistic forum for the emancipation of women. The progressive subjection of French women to patriarchal rule paralleled the progressive loss of creative freedom for French actresses. Natalie Zemon Davis has pointed out that from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, French women were losing even the few liberties they had acquired during the Renaissance; they were progressively forced "to withdraw from productive labor. . . . married women . . . had largely lost what independent legal personality they had formerly had, and they had less legal right to make decisions on their own about their dowries and possessions than at an earlier period."[108]

The tragic irony of *Les Chinois* is that in the play, Colombina is triumphant and the *parterre* allows Isabella to marry the Italian actor of her choice, but in reality the French theatre was rapidly taking over and the Italian theatre was soon to be closed. Actresses were to lose much of their creative freedom; as a result, they were increasingly interpreters of roles created by male playwrights, rather than the holistic creator-performers they had been during the golden age of the commedia.

[105] Ibid., 16.

[106] Judith Lorber, "Using Gender to undo Gender: A Feminist Degendering Movement," *Feminist Theory* 1, no. 1 (2000): 79–95.

[107] Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 417–41.

[108] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 126.

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The role of Colombina is like the false dawn of women's emancipation, like a cry signaling a loss of freedom looming in the near distance, though simultaneously it is a celebration of freedom before the backlash. Caterina Biancolelli's Colombina was a female trickster and "thief of language"; by taking possession of the comedic techniques at her disposal, she achieved what Hélène Cixous has urged women writers and performers to do: "grab language, fly with it, and through laughter . . . show their authority over it."[109] Colombina/*colomba* poised for flight, so elusive in her irony!

[109] Quoted in Gray, *Women and Laughter*, 13.

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